

THE CHANGE OF ATTITUDE
TOWARDS THE BIBLE

JOSEPH HENRY THAYER

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A Lecture

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BY

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οὐ γὰρ δυνάμεθά τι κατὰ τῆς ἀληθείας, ἀλλὰ ὑπὲρ τῆς
ἀληθείας. — 2 Cor. xiii. 8.

τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἡμῶς Χριστὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν. — Gal. v. 1.



PREFATORY NOTE

HE body of the present publication is taken from an essay prepared for a select clerical circle in June, 1889. In response to an invitation from the management of the American Institute of Sacred Literature, it was transformed into a lecture, and, by request of the local Board in Boston, was delivered last month as one in a series of weekly addresses by different clergymen which is still in progress in the hall of the Young Men's Christian Association. The adverse criticisms which it elicited on this occasion were so sharp, and appeared in so many religious journals East and West, that justice to all seemed to require that it should be printed exactly as it was spoken.

In thus publishing it, I am free to con-

fess to a lurking hope that my critics (some of the foremost of whom were not, as I am credibly informed, among my hearers), on a calm perusal of it, may discover less heresy than they have charged it with; but my chief desire is to exonerate the Biblical Institute from any responsibility for my opinions. That the self-sacrificing endeavors of that organization to further Biblical study should be hindered by unmerited distrust, is much to be regretted. I am glad to be able to add, that neither the present publication nor statement is made at the suggestion of any of its members.

The only difference between the lecture as it was delivered and as it is here printed consists in the insertion (p. 57 *sq.*) of one or two more paragraphs from the essay above-mentioned, and the addition of a few references to standard works in the footnotes.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS., *March*, 1891.

THE CHANGE OF ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE BIBLE



It is with some hesitation that I have consented to speak to you to-night upon the subject announced. One is loath to forfeit, or hazard, — as I fear I may, — the general approval of his fellow Christians. One who reverences the Bible is reluctant to be suspected, even, of abating in the least its due homage. Nothing is further from my intent. As one who believes that the Christian Scriptures have a just title to be called the Word of Life, and who aims to study them in that faith, I venture to address you as partakers in the same blessed inheritance and faith. We are alike, too, in loyalty to the truth. And as I should have seemed to myself delinquent had I

refused to speak out (with such explicitness as the scanty hour permits) the truth as I apprehend it, I may surely expect that you in turn will 'hear with all readiness of mind, and examine the Scriptures to see whether what is said is so.'

Permit me, before entering upon my theme, to make two prefatory remarks. Let me first call attention to the distinction between Christianity and the *records* of Christianity. The Christian religion, as a faith and a life, is well understood (at least in theory), its preëminent excellence conceded, its perpetuity, its eventual triumph. But we are concerned here only with its early literature, with the writings produced and circulated in the first generation of Christian believers. No substantive part of the truth of Christianity is discredited, should we perchance discover that the collection and even the composition of its books are not free from traces of the imperfection which cleaves to all things human.

And in the second place allow me to remind you that the view of these writings in which we, as New England Puritans, have been reared has not been the prevalent view in the Christian church through the centuries.

The Church of Rome, as you know, recognizes ecclesiastical tradition as of coördinate authority with the written records; holding that God's "supernatural revelation is contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us." Substantially the same position is held by the Eastern church, and by the Old Catholic as it formulated its tenets at Bonn in 1874.

Protestantism, on the other hand, has from the first been outspoken in maintaining the sole sovereignty of the Bible in matters of faith and life, and in relegating tradition to a thoroughly subordinate place at the best. Nevertheless—and this is the point germane to our present object—there has been a marked difference between

the Lutheran and the Calvinistic or "Reformed" confessions (so called) as respects the position and claims they have respectively assigned to the Scriptures. Some of the earliest and most important Lutheran symbols make little or no mention of the Bible as the standard; while the Reformed confessions generally put the Bible at the head, — sometimes with a full catalogue of the books held to be canonical.¹

Now, in general, our American Christianity is in this particular thoroughly of the Reformed or Calvinistic type. It has laid a disproportionate emphasis on the full and final character of the Scriptural teaching relative to the whole range of speculation and conduct, life and destiny. This exaggerated theory has been comparatively harmless in bygone days; nay, still furnishes a certain class of rough and ready controversialists with a bludgeon which they are prone to mistake for the sword of the Lord. But by reason of improved

¹ See Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, i. 216.

methods of philological study, of progress in science and discovery, of accumulating results in archæological and historic research, the theory has come to occasion restlessness and perplexity, at times not a little distress, in thoughtful souls. It has become a yoke which they — unlike their fathers — are unable to bear.

It is the claims of this *exaggerated* theory respecting the nature and function of the Biblical teachings which I invite you to join me in testing.

1. Confining our view principally to the New Testament, we may see the erroneousness of the position described if we recall the circumstances in which the New Testament originated. At the present day the book is the chief source of spiritual life. Such it has been for centuries past; such, we believe, it will continue to be for the centuries to come. But in the beginning it was not so. The primitive Christians for generations were destitute of our

collection of records. Those records came into existence gradually, as the wisdom of the authors and the varying needs of the scattered bodies of believers dictated. And it was only when death had silenced the voices of those whose eyes had beheld and hands had handled the incarnate Word of Life, that their writings began to take on distinctive sacredness. It was only under the fostering intercourse of the little groups of local believers that, after the lapse of more than a century, they were fitly framed together into that body of religious literature which will be the palladium of the church to the end of time. Moreover, it was but slowly, amid the protracted struggles with heresy within and the sifting process of bloody assaults from without, that the Christian judgment became trained to discriminate between the documents entitled to a permanent place in the canon and others early associated with them in popular or individual estimate. At first, the lines of demarcation were neither

sharp nor rigid. The Epistle of Barnabas, for example, was still read, as we know, in the days of Jerome ; the Epistle to the Laodiceans is found very commonly in certain copies of the Vulgate from the ninth century down ; and a translation of Hermas occurs in a MS. Latin Bible even of the fifteenth century.¹ As respects the last-named work even the conservative Zahn remarks,² "It enjoyed alike in the West and the East all the rights of a Biblical book. . . . As respects circulation, acknowledgment, and influence the Shepherd surpassed, at the close of the second century and beginning of the third, more than one document which to-day belongs to the New Testament." The recently discovered "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," also, in the time of Clement, held the rank of a sacred writing at least in Alexandria ; and not before the days of Atha-

¹ See Westcott, *History of the Canon*, p. 9.

² See his *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, i.

nasius did it sink to the deuterocanonical rank of a church "reading-book."¹

Facts like these — and they are too many to detail here — are significant. They remind us that the church produced the Bible, not the Bible the church. They may teach us that when we set the book up as the infallible and final appeal in all matters of religious belief and life, we are doing something for which we are destitute of historic warrant; we are assigning it a place and a function which it neither held nor exercised at the outset; which from the known facts of its history it could not possibly have assumed among the primitive believers for generations. The truth is, the Scriptures depend upon the church, and the church depends upon the Scriptures. To borrow the simile of a recent writer:² "There is a young mother carrying her boy who cannot yet walk alone. Years pass on. There is a woman leaning

¹ Zahn, *u. s.*, p. 361.

² Watkins, *Bampton Lectures* for 1890, p. 149.

on the arm of a strong man whose strength has been born of her, and now supports her. It is the same mother; the same child."

2. The erroneousness of the procedure under consideration becomes more evident when we turn from the circumstances under which the book originated to its intrinsic characteristics.

Under this head room can be found for only a few specifications. Indeed, specifications might seem to be unnecessary to one who reflects upon the general nature of the Christian dispensation as that is set forth in the Book whose claims we are considering. The New Covenant is expressly set in contrast with the Old as being "one of the spirit, not of the letter" (2 Cor. iii. 6). The emphasis laid by the apostle on this contrast is quite inconsistent with the idea that the new dispensation should one day become like the old, rigid and unprogressive and imprisoned forever

in a book. This is the very point of the use made more than once in the Epistle to the Hebrews (viii. 10; x. 16), of the prophet Jeremiah's words (xxxi. 33): "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws on their heart, and upon their mind also will I write them." We Protestants accept, in the full compass of its significance, the associated argument of the writer respecting the abrogation of the many Levitical sacrifices by the one sacrifice offered once for all; but why restrict the abrogation to the ritual? why frankly accept one part of the argument, and palter about the rest?

But the suggestions started thus by the very genius of Christianity are corroborated (as was just now said) by the phenomena of the book itself. I have in mind such particulars as these:—

(a.) Several, perhaps many, apostolic writings have perished. Take the Apostle Paul, for example, from whose pen came nearly

one quarter of the contents of our New Testament. The Epistles to the Thessalonians are the only extant memorials of his activity as a writer in the fifteen or twenty years intervening between his conversion and the date of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. And in the second of these canonical letters to the Thessalonians we find such language as this: "Stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye were taught, whether by word or by epistle of ours" (ii. 15, cf. 2); "The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand, which is the token [viz., of genuineness] in every epistle: so I write" (iii. 17), — language plainly suggestive of the passage of several epistles between the apostle and his converts at Thessalonica. Again: ten years or more elapsed between the conversion of the Philippian Christians and the date of our extant epistle to them, — years in which it is against all the probabilities of the case to suppose that the apostle did not write to converts whom he held in such affection-

ate remembrance. Moreover, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians which has come down to us we have a plain reference to an earlier letter: "I wrote unto you in my epistle to have no company with fornicators" (1 Cor. v. 9). And equally indubitable is the suggestion in the second (x. 9 ff.) . . . "that I may not seem as if I would terrify you by my letters. For, His letters, they say, are weighty and strong; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account. Let such a one reckon this, that, what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such," etc.

Further: the inherent probabilities and extant indications that there were many apostolic letters which did not long survive, are confirmed by the scantiness of the relics of the words and works of our Lord himself. The extant records concerning him may be read through at a sitting; yet an early believer says, "If they should be written, every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the

books that should be written ”¹ (John xxi. 25).

Against this conclusion what have we to set? Nothing! — nothing except, perhaps, a blind sense of reverence, or a dogmatic assumption. If our theory of the nature of inspiration, our view of the permanent and vital relation of the inspired writings to the Christian church, recoils from this conclusion, ought not our theory of inspiration to be reconstructed? — our view of the nature and use of the record to be made to conform to the facts of history? For to suppose that the writings which have survived were inspired in another and different way from those which have perished, is one of those fictions which the hard-pressed controversialist finds it easy to frame, but difficult to induce anybody — himself included — to believe.

(b.) Another particular disclosing the erroneousness of the view we are consider-

¹ See, fully, Bishop Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, seventh edition (1883), p. 138 sq.

ing is found in the fact that the New Testament writers employ the Old Testament chiefly through the medium of an imperfect translation. The circumstance that the early churches, of every country and party, concurred in incorporating the Old Testament Scriptures into their sacred canon is noteworthy. But still more noteworthy for our present purpose is the fact that the Old Testament accepted by the apostles and the early churches, presents that body of literature in a form which subsequent ages — including Protestantism I believe universally and from the first, — has repudiated. Of the more than a thousand (1,083) reminiscences of the Old Testament which the latest editors of the New Testament find in it, all but two and a half per cent. come from the Septuagint, and, in more than one instance out of a hundred, rest on that version as against the Hebrew original. Now, even a person disposed to maintain that for all authoritative religious uses a translation might be so

exact and complete a reproduction of the original as to be entitled to claim for itself equal partnership in the deference rendered its prototype, would confess it to be mere effrontery to set up such a claim for the Greek Old Testament. That translation is, in parts at least, hardly caricatured by the traditional witticism of an oldtime Harvard professor, that it was "made by men who had forgotten their Hebrew, and never learned Greek." Its very impotence, its mechanical literalness, may render it (if we ever succeed in rescuing its text with tolerable assurance from the débris and confusion in which it has come down to us) a valuable aid in rectifying occasionally our extant Hebrew text ; but to this extant Hebrew we are compelled to betake ourselves, again and again, when we attempt to find out what the given Greek means. Is it not plain, then, that the employment of such a translation must vitiate to that very extent the claim to unerring verbal accuracy set up in behalf of writers who

confidingly incorporate its words with their own ?

Nay, further : (c) the mode in which the New Testament writers employ this translation in vindicating the facts and doctrines which make up the staple of their record — however current and argumentatively conclusive in their day — is a mode of using Scripture which no intelligent reader can accept at the present time. Where the New Testament author, indeed, rightly quotes and applies the Greek translation, the responsibility for the perversion of the original idea, if such perversion there be, rests obviously, not on him (assuming that he knew no better), but on the translation which he and his readers alike accepted. Accordingly when the writer to the Hebrews — in support of his position that the superiority of the new dispensation to the old appears in the fact that the latter was communicated (as was believed) through angels, while in the former God spoke in the person of his Son — quotes the song

of Moses (Deut. xxxii. 43), "And let all the angels of God worship Him"; and, again (Ps. civ. 4), "who maketh his angels winds"; when he finds a foretoken of the lowly career of that Son in the language of Ps. viii., "What is . . . the son of man that thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels"; or once more, when, in proving that Christ's one sacrifice has forever superseded the constantly repeated Levitical offerings, he seizes (in x. 5) on the Septuagint mistranslation of the Fortieth Psalm, "But a body didst thou prepare for me," — he may fairly be exonerated, on the score that his Greek Bible misled him. But what shall we say of his attempt (ii. 11) to prove the generic unity of the sanctifier and the sanctified by the mutilated excerpt, "Behold I and the children which God hath given me"? or of Matthew's prophetic vindication of the residence at Nazareth by a verbal jingle? or of his mistaking the prophet's symbolic description of the peaceful advent, — "Thy

king cometh unto thee . . . lowly and riding upon an ass, even upon a colt the foal of an ass" (Zech. ix. 9), — as making reference to two different animals? or of Peter's declaration (Acts ii. 27, 31) that David spake of the resurrection of Christ in the words, "Thou wilt not give thy holy one to see corruption" (Ps. xvi.)? or Paul's reversal (in Eph. iv. 8) of the meaning of the Sixty-eighth Psalm in the words, "He gave gifts unto men"?¹

After all justifiable allowances have been made on the score of possible divergencies of ancient texts, rhetorical liberty in making quotations, and the like, there remain phenomena wholly incompatible with correct exposition; and we must frankly admit them, and renounce every theory of the nature of the Bible inconsistent with them. Nay, the candid recognition of them will open our eyes to the true nature of the connection between the religion of the

¹ Yet so Peshitto and Targum; cf. Driver in *The Expositor* for January, 1880.

New Testament and that of the Old. Instead of seeking to show that what is "latent" in the Old Testament is "patent" in the New by punctiliously tracing out minute, dubious, even imaginary correspondences between word and fact, type and anti-type, prophecy and fulfillment, we shall be brought to see that the correspondence is of no servile, no mechanical character; that fulfillment dwarfs prophecy; that the Old Testament religion, while organically related to the New, is as limited and unlike as the embryo is to the man; that the self-consistent and full-orbed image of the Messiah, for example, presented in the New Testament is by no means a scrupulous reproduction of the Messianic portraiture of the Old Testament, any more than it is identical with the discordant and self-contradictory Messianic expectations which were current when Christ appeared. But this line of thought is too extensive for us to follow out now.

(d.) Still another characteristic of the Bible inconsistent with the domination of its letter appears in the circumstance that its truths are presented in local and temporary forms.

It clothed its instructions in the phraseology current when it was written ; couched its new disclosures, even, in the imagery already familiar ; readjusted and revived conceptions well known ; and by infusing a new spirit into old forms began the creation of the new heavens and the new earth.

There are limits to the application of our Lord's parable respecting the "new wine and fresh wineskins." He certainly did not mean to intimate that Christianity required an utter break with the past ; nay, he himself set his seal to the law of development, in his parable (Matt. iv. 26) respecting the growth of the seed : "first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear." Christendom in general consents to extend the saying's application from the frequent observance of religious fasting

(the incongruity of which with the new faith the saying was first spoken to show) to other ritual terms and observances: such as the styling a Christian preacher and pastor a "priest," the holding that certain spiritual blessings are distinctively mediated by him, the regarding the simple commemoration of the Saviour's death as a sacrifice offered by that priest on the people's behalf, the insistence on the formal consecration of the building in which Christians worship, as though that were, as under the old dispensation, the temple of God; in short, to everything which makes Christianity peculiarly a matter of time and place and outward form. But (if I do not misjudge) the saying may just as legitimately be understood to dissuade us from that bondage to literalism which was a characteristic of the Jew in our Lord's day. So understood, it is enforced by the very peculiarities of the vehicle in which the truth has come down to us. And to insist that loyalty to that truth

compels us to attach equal reverence to the medium and depository of it, is as unreasonable as it would be to insist that we, in this day and land, should store our wine in skins, whether new or old.

An illustration of my meaning may be found in the embarrassment which Christian missionaries are said to encounter in Japan, in Alaska, in Greenland, owing to the ignorance of the natives of these countries respecting an animal so familiar to us and the Scriptures as the sheep! Recall such precious passages as the Twenty-third Psalm or the tenth chapter of John, the descriptions of Jesus as the Great Shepherd of the sheep and the Lamb of God, and it will appear how many suggestions, or rather groups of suggestions, both instructive and comforting, the inability to understand that single piece of phraseology deprives them of. In Alaska, we are told that no better rendering of the Twenty-third Psalm could be found than to say: "The Lord is a

first-class mountain hunter"! Mr. Ziegler (missionary of the Basle Missionary Society) testified, at the Centenary Missionary Conference held in London some three years ago, that the beautiful text in Isaiah, "though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as wool," would be unintelligible in the language of the Canarese (Southern India), for their sheep are black.¹ Doubtless kindred embarrassments are met with in adjusting the Biblical imagery to the thought of those heathen nations which do not practice bloody sacrifices. Indeed, another missionary to India, after long experience, recommended that "the Gospel of Matthew, for example, should be paraphrased or freely reproduced for the Hindus, with interjected explanatory remarks;" and another competent witness testifies that the Epistles of Paul "are understood in that country scarcely by one reader out of ten."²

Other exemplifications of the character-

¹ *Report*, vol. ii. 305.

² *Ibid.* ii. 327.

istic of the New Testament I am speaking of, as unquestionable as they are obvious, abound in the Epistle to the Hebrews. That entire epistle, indeed, may be said to require for its due appreciation a course of study in Jewish antiquities; and even then some points must be left in obscurity, or at least uncertainty, by reason of present archæological ignorance.

Further illustrations are scattered through the volume, are to be found I had almost said on every page. How many readers of the Gospel of John, nay, how many ministers, can give an intelligible and correct statement of the doctrine of the Logos, in its historic relations and philosophic assumptions, with which that Gospel opens? Very likely, again, the average English reader, when toward the close of the Prologue he finds in the margin of his Revised New Testament, against the phrase "The Word . . . dwelt among us," the addition "*Gr. tabernacled,*" joins the pack of ignorant critics in barking at the

intrusive pedantry of the Revisers, because of his utter ignorance of the fact that the word alludes to the Shechinah, or glory, which betokened the divine presence, "which was wanting in the second temple, and which it was believed would be restored once more at the Messiah's advent." Or if his recollection of the "great voice heard," by the writer of the Apocalypse, "out of the throne saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell [Gr. *tabernacle*] with them," etc., gives him a glimpse of the meaning *here*, how many readers out of ten catch the Apostle Paul's reference to the same glorious expectation of divine condescension as expressed in the then current saying that certain distinguished students of the law were "worthy that the Shechinah should rest upon them,"¹ when it crops out in his words (2 Cor. xii. 9): "Most gladly will . . . I . . . glory in my weakness, that

¹ Hackett and Abbot's edition of Smith's *Bible Dict.* iv. 2961.

the strength of Christ may rest upon [Gr. *spread a tabernacle over*] me"? And what does the ordinary English reader get from the statement that the fathers "were all under the cloud," and "drank of a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ"? (1 Cor. x. 1 *sq.*); or that "the Jerusalem that is above is free, which is our mother"? (Gal. iv. 26); "the new Jerusalem the holy city coming down out of heaven from God"? (Rev. xxi.); and that "Abraham . . . looked for the city which hath the foundations,¹ whose builder and maker is God"? (Heb. xi. 10.) This last verse, to be sure, the earlier translators have made easily intelligible, by changing its meaning. The current version, "for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God," is doubtless taken to signify (as generally as naturally) that Abraham, in the weariness of his wandering tent-life, looked forward by faith to a settled abode in a city, — a

¹ See Rev. xxi. 14.

city exempt from the instability belonging to man-made towns, because founded and perpetuated by the Eternal One, — a statement not at variance, necessarily, with the thought of the sacred writer, but certainly *not* the latter's thought.

Now the truth which I am illustrating in this random way is, not that such imagery and allusions are incapable of being understood by readers in this distant age and land after the proper amount of study (although even this is not true without qualification), but that the unmistakably Jewish or foreign cast of the thought proves it to be primarily adapted to local and temporary use. The comprehension of such phraseology is one thing ; its appreciation quite another. To catch the manifold suggestions of such language, those suggestions which constitute largely its persuasive charm and constraining power, it is necessary to be trained under the traditions, saturated with the memories and aspirations to which it makes its ap-

peal ; in a word, to be familiar with the current life and thought in Jewish or Jewish-Christian communities in the first century. If this is so, the language is not fitted, and consequently was not intended, to be applied universally and just as it stands to the thought and life of the nineteenth Christian century.

(*e.*) A further disproof of the hard and fast theory of Scripture which we are considering may be found in the variations that abound in the parallel records of the words and works of our Lord.

Passing over plump verbal contradictions, — such, for instance, as that in his instructions to the Twelve, where, according to Matthew (x. 10), they are bidden not to take a staff, but in Mark (vi. 8) to “take nothing for their journey save a staff only” (a superficial clashing which disappears in the obvious harmony of aim in the two passages), — and saying nothing about narratives in which expositors have from of old disputed whether or not the

apparent identity is real, — as, for example, the cure at Capernaum of the nobleman's son as narrated by John (iv.) and of the centurion's servant as given by the Synop-
tists (Matt. viii. 5 *sq.*; Luke vii.), what shall we say of the variant forms in which so memorable an utterance appears as that known among Christians from the third century on as "the Lord's prayer"? How explain the difference — not in trivial details merely, but in their general cast and spirit — of the Beatitudes as given respectively by the First Evangelist and the Third? How account for the diversities between the entire Sermon on the Mount as recorded by Matthew and the form and circumstances under which similar material is found in the Gospel of Luke?

But it is unnecessary to multiply examples. A comparison of the first three Gospels with each other affords undeniable proof that there is a large body of common narrative underlying them all, which the individual writers (or those from whom

they derived their accounts) have variously arranged and modified. Neither the writers' good faith, nor the historical trustworthiness of their narratives, is impeached by such variations ; but how are they consistent with the punctilious literal exactness claimed for the records by the old style well-meaning but shortsighted theorists ? Almost any page of a "Harmony of the Gospels" refutes their theory by showing that the verbal accuracy of one Evangelist can be maintained only by sacrificing that of his fellows.

3. We may find another reason for questioning the theory of the coequal and infallible authority of all parts of the New Testament in the fact that that theory sets at defiance the law of historic sequence and proportion.

It is by no misnomer that Christianity takes its name from Christ. It does not consist, in its essence, in any rule or set of rules promulgated by him. If it did, our

knowledge of it would be fragmentary and incomplete, on the apostle's own showing (John xx. 30, 31). But Christianity is CHRIST, the embodiment and exemplification of all rules in their full-orbed perfection and harmonious adjustment. He did not so much teach it as communicate it. While it holds true generally that ethical influences are diffused more by sympathy than by instruction, or, as a French writer puts it, that "virtue makes to herself friends, but she does not take pupils," it is preëminently true of Christianity that it was propagated by contagion. It was personal love to a personal Christ which distinguished it from the heathen systems which proclaimed many of the same moral maxims: love so distinctive and individualizing as to enable one who had never known him in the flesh to say, "He loved me, and gave himself for me"; so unifying, that the same apostle can truthfully say, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth

in me"; so inspiring, as to render it his ambition to "fill up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh, for his body's sake, which is the church." Those among the early believers best understood Christianity who best understood Christ. Those best understood him who best knew him. Those best knew him who were most with him, or to whom, as in Paul's case, he imparted himself by special disclosures. In accordance with these obvious principles, if we wish to get nearest to the truth as it is in Jesus, we come to the record of his personal words and works. All the records, to be sure, are of a secondary character; no one of them has his personal indorsement or authentication. And their very number and differences seem wisely designed by divine Providence to preclude bondage to the letter. But what the Master himself did and said is what we most want to know and to ponder. And the value of the Gospels for us lies largely in the fact that they give us just this, —

neither diluted nor overlaid with the reflections or applications of the writers or others. The heart of the New Testament, therefore, to all sound Christian thinking is the Four Gospels. Even those who undertake to rearrange the component parts of the volume chronologically are constrained to renounce their own principle, and let the Gospels begin it. The believer seems to himself to have the very kernel of it when he has culled out "the Words of the Lord Jesus" for his manual of devotion. When we come upon the saying in the Book of Acts, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," it sparkles to our eyes like a diamond to which the context is but as the setting. When we find that apostle whose convictions and experience combined to make him lay stress on his apostolic authority carefully discriminating between the Lord's injunctions and his own, and styling the latter in comparison an "opinion which he gives as one who has found mercy of the Lord to be

faithful" (1 Cor. vii. 25), he seems to us to be expressing himself according to the manifest proprieties of the case.

Now all this natural sequence and proportion in the historical relations of the contents of the New Testament the opinion still held by certain believers disregards; nay, openly renounces and condemns, as a leading writer has recently done in one of the most extensively circulated Sunday-school journals of Christendom.

4. The mistaken views we are considering involve a misuse of the Biblical term "Word of God."

No descriptive appellation of the Bible is oftener on the lips of certain persons than this. Immemorial usage has given it a prescriptive right, which under proper safeguards may be vindicated. But the persons referred to hold that it warrants them in quoting every phrase in the book with a "Thus saith the Lord." The man

who questions any statement in it is impeaching the divine veracity. And though this misconception be not applied so blindly as to attach equal sanctity in the Book of Job, for example, to the utterances of Satan, Job's wife, and Jehovah, though a certain instinctive common sense has preserved some pastors — alas, not all — from the absurdity of selecting the “Touch not, taste not, handle not” of the ascetic errorists among the Colossians as the motto for their Sunday-school Temperance Society, and thereby forcing the apostle to recommend the very maxims he disparages, nevertheless the misapprehension which this designation of the Bible fosters is fraught with mischief.

I would not question either the probability or the propriety of that interpretation of 1 Tim. iv. 5 — “Every creature of God is good, . . . if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified through the word of God and prayer” — which takes it as an analytic designation of grace at

meat, drawn from the act that such grace consisted of language borrowed from our canonical Psalms. Nor would I be understood as censuring the popular use of the phrase "word of God" in such texts as "the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God";¹ "preach the word"; "not handling the word of God deceitfully"; "the word of God is not bound," and the like, which applies them directly to our sacred records. Nevertheless, exegetically it *is* a mistake, and like other mistakes has produced pernicious results. For the term "word of God" even the tyro in Biblical study ought to know does not denote a *record*. It is the *spoken* word, as the very etymology of the common Greek term indicates; it is the word as embodying ideas; it is the divine impartation to the living soul; it is the doctrine, the vital and vitalizing truth consummately disclosed in and by Him who is the "Word made flesh," to which the *Bible* applies this designation in

¹ ῥῆμα θεοῦ.

the overwhelming majority of instances. Hence it is called "the word of truth" again and again; "the word of the cross" (1 Cor. i. 18); "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. xiii. 19); "the word of God which the multitudes pressed upon Jesus to hear" (Luke v. 1); of which he says in his intercessory prayer, "I have given them thy word;" and the speaking of which is within the compass of a single verse (Acts viii. 25) made synonymous with "preaching the gospel;" "the word" which the same book tells us mightily grew and prevailed (xix. 20), which was spread abroad (xiii. 49), so that all in Asia heard it (xix. 10), and which the Gentiles "glorified" by hearing gladly and believing (xiii. 48).

Now, to transfer the august predicates which belong to the utterances of Him who spoke as never man spake, or which in a secondary and qualified way may be legitimately applied to the words of his heralds and interpreters, to the record of those divine and inspired communications, and to

an imperfect translation of that record, is a procedure which should (at least from time to time) be challenged by every friend of truth. To jump to the conclusion that because He in whom there was no deceit has said, "The word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me" (John xiv. 24), therefore the words in which the story of that divine teaching is narrated were infallibly dictated by the Father is—to jump into a morass: "a gulf profound as that Serbonian bog . . . where armies whole have sunk." And when we hear well-meaning but over-zealous believers reiterating "The Bible is the Word of God," even should we refrain from breaking out upon them with Luther's impatient exclamation, "God's word here! God's word there!" it will often have a salutary effect to ask them whether they think God's word was written in English? is the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon race?—anything, to set them a-thinking, — thinking about a distinction which may prove the

salvation of their faith in some hour of trial. It has been greatly to the advantage of Lutheranism that it has from the first laid stress upon the Biblical sense of the term "Word of God" as denoting the subject-matter, the contents of Scripture; and thus, by liberating faith from the fetters of bondage to the letter, has, so far as it has remained true to itself, greatly quickened that enterprising study of the Scriptures which alike instructs and blesses Christendom. To this is due in no small measure Germany's preëminence — with all her faults and aberrations — alike in criticism and in exegesis.¹

5. Another indication of the erroneousness of the view of Scripture we are considering is afforded by the fact that it cannot be consistently applied.

It would be in point to remind the adherents of that view that they, in common with all Christendom, have come to acknowledge its erroneousness in partic-

¹ See Dorner, *Hist. of Protestant Theology*, ii. 429 sq.

ulars once stoutly defended by their lineal ancestors of former generations. Who now would declare that the Bible proves there are no men at the antipodes ; opposes the Gregorian Calendar, which makes the year begin in January, by representing Eve as tempted at the outset by an apple, which was possible only in case the year began in September ; forbids the apparent motion of the sun to be ascribed to the earth's rotation ; decides whether the stars are inhabited or not ; restricts the work of creation to six days of twenty-four hours each ; compels us to believe in witchcraft, and make it a capital offense ; prohibits resistance to tyrants ; — and a score of other outgrown opinions. Nay, are there not persons present who can recall the time when leading New England theologians met the geological evidence of the earth's antiquity by making the Bible sponsor for the assertion that God made the fossils and the coal by instantaneous fiat, and placed them where they are found ?

But dropping matters of speculation, let me emphasize the fact that in matters of morals literalism breaks down practically, as appears from the conduct of those who advocate it as a theory.

Due allowance must be made here, to be sure, for indiscriminating or erroneous interpretations. As for example, in the case of the injunction "Swear not at all," the misuse of which to prove the unlawfulness of all oaths involves patent disregard of the context, as well as of the practice, if not of Jesus, at least of his apostle. It must be confessed, too, that a much more heroic loyalty towards the letter of the Biblical precepts is exhibited in some quarters than in others. Certain fragmentary and outlying groups of Christians, for instance, still observe the pedilavium, obey the command to "Salute one another with a holy kiss," hold to the permanent validity of the Jewish prohibition about going to law before unbelievers, to the superior sanctity of celibacy, the illicit character of marriage

with a non-Christian or even a deceased wife's sister, and so on.

But after all due allowance has been made for the idiosyncrasies of sects or individuals, it is undeniable that relentless champions of the unyielding sanctity of the very letter of Holy Writ are loath to give the same a personal reference when, forsooth, it prescribes that a bishop must marry but once ; would think long before publicly insisting that women must not be adorned with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly raiment ; have too much unsanctified common sense to undertake to dispose of their unmarried daughters after the autocratic method sanctioned by the apostle in his letter to the Corinthians ; are constrained to confess to some inward annoyance at Paul's injunction to Timothy to be no longer a water-drinker ; would be loath to have it known that they take to the letter the precept not to resist an evil man, or that they are ready to surrender their cloak to him who would take their

coat ; and, in truth, are in very little danger of reducing themselves to beggary (like Francis of Assisi) by their fidelity to the command, "Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away," or, like Origen, of going barefoot and doing worse things in heroic loyalty to that letter which in theory they are forward to defend. In short, does not their practice—to speak quite frankly of them—by its conformity to current usages in deviating from what according to their principle ought to be taken as it stands, become unpleasantly suggestive of a certain class who of old made the commandments of God of none effect, through their traditions.

6. But again, the mistaken character of the view of Scripture we are considering appears in the fact that it sets the scholar at variance with the Christian.

Take such questions as the structure of the Pentateuch, the authorship of the

Psalms, the genuineness of the Fourth Gospel, the historic trustworthiness of the writings of Luke, by way of illustration. On the merits of those Old Testament questions I for one am not forward to give an opinion. And I do feel free to express my impatience when Old Testament experts meet dogmatism with dogmatism. The vastness of the problems such questions present, the remoteness and multifariousness of the factors entering into them, their extreme interest and at the same time the profound obscurity which in part at least envelops them, render them an inviting field for the ingenuity of those who would reconstruct the records in the name of historic science. Some of the smart castigations these reconstructionists receive, I cannot but think they have brought upon themselves: by their arrogant insistence that everybody shall see through their eyes, and by their disregard of the truth that ignorance on the one side has no more right to assert than ignorance on the other has to deny.

Accordingly, when we are told, for example, with oracular positiveness that all the contents of our Psalter are of post-exilic or Maccabæan date, and that David, although called "the sweet psalmist of Israel," as far back as the Second of Samuel (xxiii. 1), never wrote a Psalm; and in consequence the ecclesiastical bruiser comes out and gives the critic a drubbing, bidding him take a course in rudimentary logic and learn how difficult it is to prove a universal negative, I for one do not feel like interfering. But when quiet has been restored, and as lovers of truth we sit down to a candid examination of the problem, and find, for instance, that many concurrent indications demonstrate that the Pentateuch is a composite structure of diverse dates, that the linguistic and internal characteristics of many of the Psalms disprove the statements in their superscriptions, is it not a dire evil that we should feel any, the least, impulse to blink or resist the evidence? Is it not to

be grievously deprecated that our love of truth should pull us one way, and our allegiance to our creed or our professional interests and success pull us another ?

Or, turning to the problems from the New Testament which were mentioned: for myself I firmly believe that the Fourth Gospel, in spite of all counter-indications from within and without, will yet vindicate itself to Christian scholarship as the work of the Apostle John; and that Luke — notwithstanding his plump anachronism in the matter of Theudas, the blunders he is accused of relative to the enrollment under Quirinius, and any other historical lapses due to ignorance or carelessness which the most captious criticism may ascribe to him — will in the end be confessed to be a fairly trustworthy chronicler of the origin, nature, growth, extension, of the primitive church, which is all he claims to be and what intelligent believers chiefly prize him for. But it is calamitous when such believers are made to feel that loyalty

to him as a sacred historian should make them slow to admit his fallibility in things secular ; find themselves tempted to all sorts of wire-drawn expedients in order to get rid of apparent variations between his narrative and the statements of the Pauline Epistles ; are habitually warned in representative religious journals to be on their guard against the “advanced views” in this book, the “radical views” in that, the “neological tendencies” in a third, and so on, till they grow timid about entering very deeply into Biblical studies. It is a dire calamity, I say, that there should be a general impression that scholarship is on one side, and piety on the other ; that young men should be made to feel that the better Biblical students they become, the worse Christians they are likely to be ; that the candidate for the ministry or the occupant of a pulpit should be haunted by a misgiving that too much learning will hazard his professional prospects or standing.

7. But this erroneous view of the Bible damages something more precious than Biblical scholarship. It is repressive of the spiritual life of the church.

What I mean to intimate is, that the vigor and rigor with which a certain theory of the nature of Scripture holds the believer of the present day to the letter of those records of the past is really — though unintentionally — dishonoring to the Divine Spirit. The Author of life, the Spirit of Truth, dwells in all true disciples of Christ according to the promise, and would guide them now as of old into all the truth, if permitted to do so. But the parting promise of the Redeemer seems to be distrusted. The present and abiding indwelling of the Holy Ghost seems to be forgotten. Yet history is full of attestations; and we have no right (as it seems to me) to abandon so august and sacred a prerogative of every believer to be discredited or evil spoken of by reason of the vagaries of ignorant enthusiasts. Once

and again in the history of the church have the co-working providence and grace of God wrought out in the experience of an individual believer truths which have changed the course of history, which have been life unto myriads. Witness justification by faith in the struggle of Luther; or even such truths in our own day as the salvability of the most abandoned; or such practical matters as the method of self-support in mission churches; or even the foreign missionary enterprise itself. In these and the like great Christian discoveries, as they may fairly be called, the believing soul, in present loyalty to a present God, broke away from traditions, and followed heroically the divine guidance, — only to discover afterwards that it had called forth to newness of life some truth which otherwise had still lain buried in the record.

But some of you, perhaps, are beginning to ask, What is the *correct* view of the nature of the Bible? — the view which ought

to take the place of the view which has been opposed.

The answer must of necessity be a brief one. It might be given in a single word, had not that word already been so appropriated by certain early comers as to be made to carry suggestions of doubtful correctness, to say the least. I refer to the word "historic;" and to the fact that it has become suggestive, to many minds, of such theories as that of Wellhausen respecting the Old Testament and of Baur concerning the New. But the attempt to monopolize this title, or the circumstance that this epithet is sometimes made to do duty as an argument, so that students not ready to receive particular theories are charged with being destitute of "historic" information, devoid of "historic" or "literary" sense, and the like, is no sufficient reason either for abjuring the word, or shutting one's eyes to the truths it covers.

When the "historic" view of the Bible is advocated, it is not meant that the Bible

is primarily a book of history, or to be tested simply by historic standards. Nor does the "historic" view maintain that, in order to get spiritual profit from the book, it is necessary for a reader to know exactly the circumstances in which its several parts originated. That knowledge in reference to certain parts, the Book of Job for example, and sundry of the prophecies, we have not now, and very likely never shall have. Just here we must take heed not to overlook the truth that there is a wide difference, as respects the importance of historical information to the right understanding and use of the sacred volume, between its various parts. A devotional composition is far less dependent on circumstances than a didactic. In some of our hymn-books, for instance, the names and dates of the authors are given with the hymns; in others the hymns appear anonymously. The former method of printing, however much it may add occasionally to our interest and devotion when an author happens to be

already endeared to us, cannot be said to be essential to the edifying use of the hymn. So with the Psalter. When, where, by whom, a Psalm was written, are matters of small account to the modern worshiper. But it is quite otherwise with the Epistles. Their main substance and aim are didactic; and the right comprehension and use of their instruction depends often upon a knowledge of the circumstances which called them forth; a knowledge, alas, which in not a few instances is no longer possessed by us.

The "historical" view and method aims to use all the knowledge of this sort which is still attainable. It looks at the Biblical books in their original relations; strives to ascertain and take into account the particulars relative to time, place, person, which called them forth, and shaped them. It is styled the "historic" view accordingly, not in the sense that it regards the Bible as primarily consisting of history, or designed to teach history, but as a book to be studied

and understood and used in the light of history.

Perhaps a simple illustration may make the matter plainer. Some of us can recall the time when the narrative of our Lord's first miracle occasioned the friends of temperance not a little annoyance. That he should make from one hundred to one hundred and fifty gallons of wine for a bridal festival seemed too ugly a fact to be admitted. Hence many and ingenious were the devices framed for evading the evident meaning of the record: that the word translated, "draw out" signifies specifically "to draw *water*," and so indicates that only the contents of the goblet borne to the ruler of the feast were changed into wine; that the "wine" was such merely in appearance, and was devoid of any intoxicating quality; that the miracle was wrought not on the beverage, but on the man, his senses of sight, smell, taste, being affected as they would have been by wine; and so on. But respectable commentators have ceased to

affront ingenuous readers by any such artificial makeshifts. To all possible scruples which the incident may start the sufficient reply is, Interpret *historically*. Remember that Palestine in the first century is not America in the nineteenth.

The change of view, then, which I am advocating consists simply in conforming our opinion respecting the Bible to the undeniable properties of the book itself.

It involves such a readjustment of our theories respecting the book as shall make them harmonize with the facts. It requires us to hold such a conception of the nature and function of Scripture as agrees with its history. Historically, the New Testament writings were the product of Christianity; exhibit to us the Christian faith as understood and applied by the first generation of believers and the immediate disciples of Christ himself. Their understanding of it was necessarily shaped by the forms of thought and speech then cur-

rent; their application of it was wisely adjusted to then existing usages and institutions. In all these things there was of necessity a large temporary element. The power of Christianity itself has been shown in the abolishment, or at least the essential modification, of many of these forms of thought and speech and action. It is an obvious misapprehension to confound the temporary with the permanent. The book does not — does not claim to — give us a programme of history; does not map out the course of human affairs under the divine administration to the last syllable of unrecorded time and the unreckoned eternities beyond. In bringing to it all our speculative problems, in running to it under every mental perplexity, catching up any and every scattered reference we may fancy we discover in its pages, and proclaiming the same as the final and unerring answer of Infinite Wisdom, we are doing more credit to our zeal than to our discretion. In looking upon it as primarily designed

to give divinely authenticated information on all details of life and destiny, we are grievously overstraining its legitimate use.

The view of the Scriptures here urged I have called a "change." But let me remind you again that it is such only in reference to current and local and comparatively recent views. Of the great mass of Christian believers down through the centuries it is doubtful whether more than a small fraction have held the hard and fast theory currently advocated among us to-day. They may be said to have been unanimous and emphatic from the first in asserting the inspiration of the written word ; but as to the degree and nature of this inspiration there has been great diversity, or at least indefiniteness, among leading Christian thinkers all along. It was not before the polemic spirit became rife in the controversies which followed the Reformation that the fundamental distinction between the "Word of God" and the record of that word became obliterated, and the pestilent

tenet gained currency that the Bible is absolutely free from every error of every sort.

But some one may say, You are giving us in place of the Bible little more than a batch of problems. You have brought together a mass of troublesome facts, and present them to us as though they constituted the Bible. We can find such things in abundance in the works of the destructive critics.

But if I have brought you a batch of problems, I have brought them to a circle of Biblical students. Every problem, every perplexity is an appeal to study. As to "troublesome facts" there should be no such things to a fearless and truth-loving student. "Facts" are — FACTS: neither made nor unmade by the critics. As docile students it is our business to learn to keep house with them. And as to the "destructive critics," it is high time — if you will permit me to say so — it is high time that

the friends of the Bible ceased to leave such matters to this class of writers : men who make of them their stock in trade, and produce the impression that because they annoy the professed friends of the Bible, they damage the Bible ; because they puncture traditional theories or current opinions *about* the Bible, they dethrone the book itself. Sensitiveness and timidity here are out of character in a believer. Nineteen centuries of conquest may reasonably beget some confidence in the book, even on the bare basis of the doctrine of chances. But no servant of the God of truth should hesitate to follow where He leads. The path may seem to lie under the cloud and through the sea ; but "He knows the way He taketh, and I will walk with Him."

And just here bear with me a moment if I so far depart from the usage or the purpose of these lectures as to utter a word of admonition to Sunday-school teachers and preachers of the gospel, in

case I have the honor to address any such. Guard against the seductiveness of SILENCE in this matter. To hold one's peace at such a time as this is neither honest nor politic.

But, you ask, what shall we say? The critics are not agreed. We hesitate to break down the received opinions till we can put other and better in their place. We ourselves are in uncertainty about many points; and not knowing what to do, let us not do we know not what.

Beware, my friends, lest you allow sophistical plausibilities to keep you from the truth! The critics *are* agreed, that the view of Scripture in which you and I were educated, which has been prevalent here in New England for generations, is untenable. And you and I may convince ourselves that, so far at least, they are thoroughly in the right. How, then, can we justify ourselves as public religious teachers in longer inculcating, or even tolerating, known error?

✓ I would not belittle the dangers incident

to a change of opinion. But are there no dangers on the other side? In my judgment, the gravest peril awaits those whom the results of modern criticism overtake unawares; who, wrapt in their conceit of wisdom, imagine that from the day the fathers fell asleep all things continue as they were.

And as to the unsettling of believers, let us not blind ourselves to the fact that multitudes are unsettled already. Yea, over not a few open, ingenuous minds is there impending something like "a horror of great darkness." They need the reassurance from you for which they have a right to look; the confidence which comes from knowing that men of thorough professional learning, men of weight and sobriety of judgment, men of matured and tested and downright Christian character and convictions, hold these views, and get no harm from them; hold them, and find the foundation of God no whit less sure than before; hold them, and get from them

new incentives to those sacred studies which have blessed the church, and to which all secular learning can be made tributary.

As for professional brethren not yet ready for a change of front, a revival of the primitive conviction and spirit will produce in us a revival of the primitive mode of procedure. However "mighty in the Scriptures" your evangelist may be, "knowing only" an antiquated view of them, "when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly."

But inquirers, you tell me, demand certainties. They clamor for immediate and unequivocal answers.

Doubtless; and overlook the fact that divine Wisdom rarely vouchsafes such. God's reserve is vastly more edifying to the docile soul than man's dogmatism. If God's book had had the average man for its author, no doubt it would have abounded

in direct and categoric replies to all questions. The most complicated and recondite problems of time and eternity would be solvable by a process as sure and simple as the rule of three!

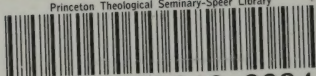
But, alas, impatient souls, it is not so. His people do not get into the promised land that way. We must accept, and adjust ourselves to, the limitations and uncertainties to which Infinite Wisdom has seen fit to subject us even in the realm of Revelation. Nay, these very disabilities (as our short-sighted judgment is apt to deem them) are not only in harmony with the conditions of our being in relation to physical and intellectual truth, but are suited to nurture a reverent sense of dependence, a prayerful search for guidance, which in themselves are consummate blessings, and which in the end will inherit the promises.

In fact, just here we may find a palmary argument for the view of Scripture which has been advocated. Our theories and systems have their day. Our formularies of

doctrine and schemes of ethics are transitory. Progress in philosophy, changes in society, necessarily modify them. Statements and views accepted at present must in time be superseded, as their predecessors have been. And however much we may vaunt the inexpugnable quality of historic facts, let us remember that facts, events, records even, have in themselves little strength or steadiness of persuasion. The blessing and promise of the new view of Scripture lies in the circumstance that it remands externalities, whether books or systems, to their proper secondary place, and brings to the front the central and all-conquering truth of Christianity, viz., personal loyalty to a personal Master, — the crucified, risen, reigning Christ. That age, that church, that man, cannot go far astray, who strives after a life hidden with Christ in God.

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